

Trump and Sisi: A New Brotherhood in Egypt?

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‘He took control of Egypt. And he really took control of it.’

- Trump on President el-Sisi of Egypt

In September during a visit to the United Nations, President el-Sisi of Egypt met Donald Trump in a New York hotel and afterwards claimed that he had ‘no doubt’ the real-estate mogul would make a strong leader. Trump, for his part, said of el-Sisi that he was a ‘fantastic guy’ and they had ‘great chemistry.’ With such a seemingly strong rapport it was little wonder that the Egyptian strongman was the first world leader to call Trump following his election win earlier this week. Yet despite this personal goodwill, it is arguably the end of the Obama era, more so than the looming Trump presidency, that will be considered by many in the Egyptian elite as an opportunity to re-set their relations with the United States.

The Egyptian regime has been critical of the White House’s response to the 2011 uprising in Cairo, particularly the perceived betrayal of longstanding partner Hosni Mubarak. Relations were further strained by the 2013 military ousting of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood regime and the ongoing reprisals meted out against its former leaders and supporters. Despite her calls as Secretary of State for a more conservative response to the crisis in 2011, Clinton’s recent rhetoric, especially in a primary debate when she referred to the Egyptian regime as an ‘army dictatorship,’ suggested a hardening in her stance toward el-Sisi’s government – a fact not lost on the Egyptians and which partly explains their recent flirtations with Russia and Iran. In contrast, Trump’s predilection for ‘strong leaders’ will likely be welcomed across the Middle East as the President–elect is, according to Robin Wright of *The New Yorker*, expected to prioritise ‘stability over democratic values.’

The impending Trump-era should also be viewed within the broader geopolitical context of the Middle East, particularly the role of an increasingly adventurous Russia and the continuing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. El-Sisi's government is nearing a deal with Russia's state-owned nuclear energy corporation, Rosatom, to build a nuclear plant on Egypt's Mediterranean coast. In October, Russian military units conducted their first ever joint exercise on Egyptian soil and Cairo voted in the United Nations Security Council for a Russian sponsored resolution on the crisis in Syria; a move which infuriated Saudi officials and, as some sources suggested, was partly the cause of Saudi oil giant Aramco withholding monthly oil shipments to Egypt. A Trump presidency will not stop the Egypt-Russia nuclear deal, nor necessarily help mend the growing rift between Egypt and its fellow Arab states, but it may prompt a warming of relations as Washington's foreign policy becomes less concerned with human rights and the internal exercise of power.

Although the construction of the nuclear plant is part of a range of measures designed to tackle an ongoing energy crisis, it also signals a growing Russian interest in the region and the willingness of Egypt to seek sponsors beyond the US and its Gulf Partners. Although other factors should be considered, such as ensuring the recommencement of flights from Russia that were halted after Islamic State downed a MetroJet flight in 2015, the recent Egyptian posturing can also be viewed as strategic messaging campaign targeting Washington in the lead up to the election; a reminder for the next administration that Egypt, lying astride the Suez canal and bordering Israel, with 80 million Arabs, fighting Islamic militants in the Sinai, and with an economy teetering on the edge of ruin is too important to fail and will look elsewhere for sponsors if needed.

The strained Saudi-Egypt relationship can be viewed through the prism of this economic and strategic hedging and a growing discontent within Egypt regarding perceptions of Saudi influence. The widespread rioting in April following the handover of two Red Sea Islands to the Kingdom is evidence of this dissatisfaction and of a growing Saudi tendency to tie aid to the Kingdom's strategic objectives. There is also the perception –promoted by Egypt itself – of a more conciliatory posture toward Saudi

Arabia's regional rival, Iran. A harder line toward Tehran by the Trump administration, perhaps even the unravelling of Obama's nuclear deal, may extinguish these overtures before they truly get started and bring Egypt firmly back within the strategic orbit of Washington. Egypt-Saudi relations may likewise warm as el-Sisi's regime perceives itself to be on firmer political and economic ground. If Iran pursues a nuclear weapon in response to a reversal on its nuclear deal with the US, it is conceivable that the Arab states will seek their own deterrent in the form of a nuclear weapon, developed by either Egypt or Saudi Arabia, or perhaps in concert. Although, given the current state of both countries' nuclear program, it would be almost impossible for such an eventuality to occur within the life of the first Trump administration.